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Citation for published version:

Easton, R & Sun, L 2008, 'A Real-life Study of the Intercultural Communicative Competence of the Chinese MSc Students in Edinburgh University' *Scottish Languages Review*, vol. 18, no. Autumn 2008, pp. 52-60.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Scottish Languages Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Easton, R., & Sun, L. (2008). A study of intercultural communicative competence. *SCILT - Scottish Languages Review*, 18(Autumn 2008), 52-60.

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A Real-life Study of the Intercultural Communicative Competence of the Chinese MSc Students in Edinburgh University

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Purpose

Currently, around 60,000 young Chinese students are studying in the UK (British Council China, 2007). For the societies they are living in, like a class and the students' associations, they are expected to contribute to the harmonious co-existence and also to the range of diversities within these societies. So as for individuals, it would be desirable for them to gain an understanding of others and of themselves and more able to reflect upon and question the social conditions in which they live. To undertake such tasks individuals require abilities known collectively as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), a concept that was perhaps most clearly described by Michael Byram (1997). It is a collection of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (Fantini, 2006). This study aimed to investigate Chinese students' ICC, evaluating both strengths and weaknesses. Chinese students' perceptions of their ICC were compared and contrasted with those from native English speakers. The findings will be of interest to students who are planning a period of learning in another country, as well as to educators wishing to support students in this endeavour.

Main Research Questions

For the above reasons, the main research questions were as follows:

1. What are Chinese students' perceptions of their ICC?
2. What are their reflections on and suggestions for ICC development?
3. What are native speakers' of English perceptions of Chinese students' ICC?
4. What are native speakers' suggestions for ICC development?

Participants in this study were all postgraduate students from the University of Edinburgh. As this study intended to give a real-life picture of the Chinese students' ICC, those students who were living and studying in a host environment were better choices than those living in their own country. Also, being one of the oldest and largest universities in Scotland, the University of Edinburgh enrolls thousands of students from all over the world each year. Among these overseas students there are many hundreds of Chinese students. For the purpose above, two groups of participants were investigated in this study. Group A was Chinese MSc students (N=45) who were from mainland China. These students were invited by the researchers to participate in the study because they had the shared experience of living and studying in Edinburgh at the University of Edinburgh. There was no attempt made to undertake a full-scale investigation of all Chinese students at the University of Edinburgh; the participants invited to take part in the investigation were students within the School of Education.

This meant that it was relatively easy to contact them for the purposes of the study. The Chinese students also provided a point of reference for the language education they had experienced before coming to Edinburgh. How these students self-evaluated their ICC on many aspects was investigated. The ten Scottish students that made up Group B were invited to participate in the study because they were in the same academic environment as the Chinese students and also had frequent interaction with Chinese students in the University of Edinburgh. The students in Group B had no particular personal or professional interest in language; they did have the advantage of being able to comment on their daily interactions with Chinese students. Their perceptions about Chinese MSc students' ICC were investigated. There was no attempt to undertake a wider study as this was simply beyond the scope of this initial study. It will be clear that there are no claims to generalisability arising from this single-site study but it is hoped that the study will provide useful starting points for further research in this area.

Design & Methodology

Questionnaire A consisted of thirty questions covering seven aspects: 1) perceptions of one's language proficiency in intercultural communication; 2) knowledge; 3) skills; 4) attitudes; 5) awareness; 6) reflection of previous intercultural communication education; 7) suggestions for improvement.

Questionnaire B worked as an additional but also important part for this study. It was, on the one hand, designed to be compared with some of the responses of participants in QA; on the other hand, to invite suggestions for the improvement of Chinese students' ICC from the interlocutors' perspective. Altogether three main questions were asked, followed by sub-questions. According to the nature of answers to be analyzed, dichotomous questions, open-ended questions and rank order questions were employed.

For the reasons outlined above this is a small scale piece of research. A future study might investigate Chinese students' ICC in more varied settings.

Results & Analysis

Quantitative data from Questionnaire A were analyzed using SPSS 14.0. The qualitative data from Questionnaires A and B were categorized and the significant findings are cited below:

Language proficiency

Nearly three quarter (71%) of the participants responded that communication in English was neither difficult nor easy for them. Compared with daily communication, academic communication was harder for them, in daily communication. In the Chinese students minds, among the four language areas of (1) vocabulary, (2) Scottish accents, (3) specialised words and phrases, and (4) speed of speech, 'words and phrases' ranked the most difficult aspect in their communication, followed by 'Scottish accents and vocabulary' as well as 'speed of speech'. When speaking English in front of native speakers, there was a remarkable decrease in confidence for Chinese students compared to speaking English in front of their Chinese compatriots.

Knowledge

Participants agreed that their knowledge about Scotland and Scottish culture has increased during their stay in Edinburgh, and they thought knowing the host and host culture helped their intercultural communication. They also considered knowledge about China and its culture as an important element. More than half of them would like to know more about their own country's politics and histories. In addition, knowledge of international affairs was seen as useful in promoting good intercultural communication.

Skills

Many of the participants were not satisfied with their ability in using skills to improve their intercultural communication. When asked which techniques would be useful for extending one's knowledge about Scotland and Scottish culture, making friends with native speakers and using the media (including internet, television, books, newspaper and magazines and so on) were seen as very important.

Attitudes

In general, positive results were showed on the part of 'attitudes'. More than half of the participants (56%) reported having a willingness to learn from native speakers, both their language and culture. However, there were more participants who would like to make friends with Chinese rather than other nationalities, taking up a proportion of 27%.

Awareness

Awareness has been seen as the keystone of ICC. 40% of the participants agreed that the Scottish environment makes differences to their lives, while the rest of the participants were either not sure or did not think their lives had been changed to any extent. Nearly half of the participants had no idea of how they were viewed by the members of Scottish society. Most of them could not perceive Scottish people's perspectives, and others considered this question did not make any sense for them. This indicates that there are difficulties associated with respondents' awareness of other people's situations. It may also reflect a lack of engagement with the host environment as represented by members of the general public and with the academic environment in particular as represented by fellow students.

Reflections of Previous Educational Experience

The majority of the participants found that their previous education about the host culture was irrelevant to their real lives in Edinburgh and they strongly agreed that their previous education should have provided them with deeper insights into the world at large and other perspectives.

Suggestions for Improvement

Reflecting on their previous intercultural communication experience, participants think the following would help one's ICC development. The first one was use the media, which includes listening to the BBC, watching Western (not cowboy films!) films and series without subtitles, reading books about and visiting websites related to Scottish culture and people. The second one was making friends with native English-speaking people. It was regarded as not only an effective way to get in touch with the host culture but also the best way to improve language proficiency.

Suggestions about the English curriculum were also given by the participants. They hoped they would be given 'more lively English lessons' relevant to their lives abroad. It is remarkable that some participants commented that they would prepare themselves to be more open-minded and companionable intercultural speakers. It appears that during their stay in Edinburgh they had become more aware of the importance of openness. They had learnt to tolerate and appreciate otherness instead of 'feeling weird'. For example, one participant commented:

When I first found my flat mate always drank cold tap water, I thought that was strange and unhealthy. I even tried to persuade her stop doing that. However, my mind was changed later, because I came to realize that I might be regarded as strange for drinking hot water! Now I understand that as a cultural difference. Although I still drink hot water, I now regard drinking cold tap water as a normal thing.

Another participant felt that 'learning to appreciate phenomena different from our own makes our lives happier and more colourful'.

The information offered by the native English speakers (Group B) was very valuable and useful. To them the level of English was not a problem for day-to-day communication with Chinese students. Instead, there was a consensus that culturally based problems were the main barrier to their intercultural communication. Participants felt that Chinese students congregated more with their own kind rather than other Western students. Shyness was one of the most cited reasons and participants understood it as a cultural difference. However, as one participant commented, this 'shyness-caused' congregation would create a barrier for intercultural communication. Firstly, Chinese students would lose opportunities to interact with others and secondly, English-only speakers could not join in conversations where Chinese was spoken amongst the group.

According to Group B, Chinese students were well-known for their politeness, kindness and patience. They were also regarded as very good students having a great willingness to study hard. Participants mentioned that while these merits were indeed remarkable, they could also create barriers to one's ICC development. Participants believed that Chinese students were so concentrated on their studies that they probably missed chances to involve themselves in other activities such as local entertainment. One participant suggested that they should spend more time to experience the social culture in Scotland (e.g. going to the pub) as other Western students do, because it was a good way to make friends with local people as well as learn conversational English. In addition, during their interaction with other EU students, they acted too formally and sometimes too politely, thus make the interlocutor feel daunted. As one participant commented:

"There is an impression of perfection: they are so well educated and so polite that they appear to have no faults. This can be quite daunting. Coming from an individualistic culture, where emotions and defects are readily shared, the very politeness and respect act as a barrier to deeper communication."

Participants were asked to mark nine items in order of importance of ways to improve Chinese students' ICC from native English speakers' perspective. To be willing to engage with other students/ people rather than Chinese was regarded as the most important way. The next two important ways were to be keen to discover new perspectives on the world and work on their spoken English. The third important way was to improve academic skills to be independent learners. One participant commented on this item that Chinese students were lacking the understanding of critical scientific method. Often they simply wanted to be told what the 'right' theory was, without learning how to think and act critically for themselves. This may cause Chinese students to be quite passive in interaction, used to accepting opinions rather than being critical and creative.

Discussion

In the Chinese students' opinions, the linguistic abilities were more important than non-linguistic ones. This situation can be explained by the reality that linguistic abilities have always been the focus in China's English education while non-linguistic ones have always taken second place or been ignored. Being unhappy about their level of English, they tended to be very insecure about their English, especially when they were communicating with native speakers. Specialized words as well as Scottish accents were the problems of greatest concern for them.

Knowledge plays an important role in socialization. For preliminary interaction between people from different cultures, it is always a process of exchanging knowledge of their own country and culture. By living in Edinburgh for nearly one year, participants thought their knowledge about this country have increased. Nevertheless, as Byram (1997) remarked, the acquirement of knowledge is sometimes conscious while sometimes unconscious. So the majority of participants were not sure about whether their knowledge about Scotland was enough.

It might be a surprising finding that more than half of the participants thought their knowledge about their own country was not enough. However, it is believed that by living in China for more than 20 years, participants should have enough knowledge about their own country. According to Byram (1997), knowledge about one's own country and national identity are always 'relational'. Often the stories told are prejudiced and stereotyped. From this we may safely conclude that participants developed a new impression of their own country after they went abroad. They were offered other perspectives on and ways to view China, reflecting the meaning of an old Chinese poem: 'I cannot tell the true shape of Lushan Mountain because I myself am on this mountain'. In other words, if one wants to know all the facets of one's own country, it is a good idea to get off the 'mountain' and see it from other perspectives. In this part, Chinese students would like to know more about their country's politics and history. This finding showed a critical reflection of one's own knowledge because learners had the requirement to know other 'stories' of the same 'mountain'. Besides, most of the participants agreed that knowing about international affairs also benefits their intercultural communication. In previous studies, the content of knowledge has been limited in knowledge about one's own country and the interlocutor's country. However, this result implies as an intercultural speaker, knowledge about international affairs as wider insights about the world also takes an essential role in one's intercultural communication.

Chinese students highlighted making friends with native speakers and using modern media as the most useful ways to extend their knowledge about Scotland and Scottish culture. These two results could imply that Chinese students might know certain techniques when given a list of possible techniques, but in practice they were not generally aware of the importance of skills. According to Byram (1997), skills are an essential element in ICC development, for they enable people quickly to establish an understanding of a new cultural environment and ability to interact in increasingly rich and complex ways with people whose culture is unfamiliar to them (Byram, 1997). In practice, Chinese educators tend to teach learners cultural 'facts' instead of guiding them develop their techniques to discovery cultural elements and to understand the reasons why such cultural elements are present. Facts would be out-of-date sooner or later: it is the skills helping learners always be flexible in a changeable and changing situation that last.

Although the results showed that Chinese student participants had great willingness to engage with local people and their culture, there were no indications that they would prefer to make friends with other students rather than their own kind. Indeed, slightly more than half indicated they would still like to make friends with their own kind. Furthermore, most of them did not think they were shy, but they felt bad when there was any miscommunication between them and the native English speakers.

In general, Chinese students' awareness of their ICC was relatively weak. First, they found it hard to generalize how they were viewed by interlocutors. Second, they tended to bring their stereotypes into interaction, which showed their low ability to evaluate 'otherness' critically. According to Fantini (2000), awareness is in and of the 'self' and it is always about the self in relation to someone or something else. Aware of the potential conflict between one's own and other ideologies, the intercultural speaker is able to establish common criteria of evaluation of documents or events. Where there are incompatibilities in belief and value systems, the intercultural speaker is able to negotiate agreement on places of conflict and acceptance of difference (Byram, 1997). It was encouraging that several participants thought different cultures should not be compared and ought to be appreciated in different ways, from which a high ability of critical cultural awareness was demonstrated. Awareness leads to deeper cognition, skills, and attitudes just as it is also enhanced by their development. It is pivotal to cross-cultural entry and to acceptance by members of other cultures on their terms. It can lead to dealing critically and creatively with reality (and fantasy) (Fantini, 2000). Awareness has been regarded as the most important task of education (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1998). Once one become aware, it is difficult to reverse, that is, difficult to return to a state of unawareness (Fantini, 2000).

The results of the reflection of one's previous education part demonstrated that by living and studying in Edinburgh for nearly one year, Chinese student participants found their previous education about Scotland and its culture were not quite relevant to their actual lives in the country. This phenomenon can find its root in the position of ICC in China's Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). In the author's opinion, due to the long-time ignorance and inadequate reorganization of ICC, Chinese educators themselves do not fully understand the role of ICC in TEFL. Linguistic abilities have been emphasized as the end of TEFL, ignoring the potential of simultaneously developing learners' ICC. By living and studying in a real linguistically and culturally different country (rather than the English classroom in China), the Chinese student participants realized that their previous ICC education was inadequate. As they became aware of the value of the wider insights of the world and of others' perspectives they realised the need for education concerning this aspect. Whilst it has been shown that their cultural awareness was comparatively weak, findings in this part demonstrated that they could become aware of their inadequacies due to their educational and social experiences in Edinburgh.

Drawing on their own experiences in daily and academic life Chinese participants made several suggestions, which could be very useful resources for both Chinese educators and potential learners. Making friends with native English speakers was regarded as not only an effective way to get in touch with the host culture but also the best way to improve language proficiency. However, it is worth mentioning that this kind of engagement should never be treated as making a profit or seeking exotica from the interlocutors.

Instead, participants should engage with native English speakers in a relationship of equality (Byram, 1997). Several participants demonstrated the willingness of preparing themselves to be more open-minded and companionable. From the comments they made we can see not only positive attitudes but also critical awareness. However, only a small number of participants demonstrate these abilities in this area, suggesting that both educators and learners should place greater emphasis on this as they are crucial elements in ICC development.

Although Questionnaire B was not the major research focus of this survey, valuable information was collected as the native English speakers offered different perceptions compared with Chinese participants. They also brought forward many valuable suggestions for Chinese students to enhance their ICC.

First of all, while more Chinese students thought that linguistic abilities were more important than non-linguistic ones during their communication with native English speakers, interlocutors did not think so. For many native English speakers, the Chinese students' English was good enough for daily communication, and the main barriers were not linguistic but cultural in origin.

Second, although most of the Chinese students did not regard themselves as 'inward-looking', in their interlocutors' eyes they were congregating too much with other Chinese students rather than with other nationalities. This preference of being with one's own kind can be understood as a cultural difference, because Chinese are traditionally used to be meeting in groups while Westerners were seen as more individualistic. Participants in Group B suggested that while it was reasonable for Chinese students to be with their own kind, it might be better to be more open and also to be more involved with other nationalities.

Third, Chinese students recognized themselves as less confident when speaking to native speakers. This idea was also agreed by their interlocutors.

Fourth, both native English speakers and Chinese students thought that their critical cultural awareness had not been equally developed. Chinese students were regarded as less creative and more passive compared to other students.

Last but not least, interlocutors suggested Chinese students should be more active in local social life. Whilst the Chinese students' tendency to spend hours in the library was laudable they missed significant chances to immerse themselves in the local culture and benefit from the social networks available to them.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for the rest of his life. Laocious, 4th Century B.C.

The development of ICC maintains a link with TEFL, because the ultimate goal of TEFL is to enable language learners to communicate across borders and across cultures by using English as their foreign language. This requires not only a mastery of English grammar, vocabulary and colloquial phrases, but also other competences. ICC can be defined as a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself (Fantini, 2006). Therefore, while the grasping of second language is a *sin qua non* of IC, dimensions as knowledge, skills, attitudes as well as awareness are also essential elements to the development of ICC. ICC has been widely discussed and is always the focus of TEFL in Europe. Contrarily, it is still waiting to be sited in China's TEFL. Language itself has always

been taught and assessed as the end goal. Arguable ICC constitutes a new dimension for Chinese educators and learners. Although increasing attention has been put on ICC in China, the application of ICC theories is not very widespread and consequently the implementation of ICC is not in a desirable situation. In practice, knowledge about English-speaking countries is tested as the end of ICC, and cultural 'facts' are taught to learners without the learners being encouraged to be culturally critical. In addition, studies which have been done in China (a non-native surrounding) can hardly reflect one's real-life ICC.

This study actually provided a reflection of the ICC education in the last two decades in China as all of the Chinese participants were born and had their education in China. By defining 'ICC education', we do not think that it should only be discussed within the field of TEFL. In another words, although ICC maintains a direct link with TEFL and it is taught as the ultimate goal of TEFL, ICC education should expanded in significant other ways (Byram, 1997). For instance, in curriculum design, other subjects such as history, politics and geography should also claim the responsibilities for the teaching and assessing ICC (Byram, 1997). Furthermore, outside of classroom, media plays an important role in influencing people's perspectives and providing channels for information exchange. Therefore, ICC development presents a challenge for educators, learners, as well as our societies.

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